

Communicating Meaning across High- and Low- Context Cultures – a Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: Communication involves a host of factors, being embedded in the broad socio-cultural context in which messages are conveyed. Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed concerning patterns of communication and the way(s) they differ according to culture. Our paper draws on Hall's (1976) key notions of *low-context* and *high-context* cultures, coupled with strategies of explicitation and implicitation. Our analysis focuses on the extent to which communicators rely on "context" to overtly state something in low-context cultures, or to covertly render a message in high-context cultures. Accordingly, we aim to highlight that culture-specific ways of communication are typically reflected in the use of phrases and/or idiomatic expressions that count as allusions (historical, literary, etc.) or opaque culture-specific items.

Keywords: communication, high-/low-context cultures, phrases, idiomatic expressions, crosslinguistic equivalence

1. Introduction

The present study is guided by Edward T. Hall's theoretical framework proposed in 1976 (*Beyond Culture*) which has become a popular frame of reference for interpreting intercultural communication. According to the renowned anthropologist, we can identify cultures based on their preferences for transmitting information. As such, the information that surrounds an event (i.e., the context) may, sometimes, become an essential barrier in intercultural communication. Although Hall's viewpoint represents a pioneering undertaking, the framework is indisputably based on Franz Boas' theory of cultural relativism as well as the linguistic relativity principle, namely how language is perceived as a reflection of culture. From Hall's

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perspective, people communicate differently with one another and while some of them convey their messages explicitly (low-context cultures), others rely on implicit meaning (high-context cultures). The American anthropologist explains that “a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. While, a low context communication is just the opposite; the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall 1976, 79).

Additionally, as we all now, the Internet has become an integral part of human beings’ way of exchanging messages. Therefore, this global system of computer network is being used by more and more people to communicate both in their personal life and in the professional field. Consequently, some scholars have concluded that computer-mediated communication (or, the generic term CMC) has become an ordinary fragment of our everyday life (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Carter, 2004; Herring, 2004). Focusing on subtle nuances to provide a more sophisticated understanding concerning online communication, researchers have also taken into consideration irony, sarcasm and cynicism as well as other contextual cues (eye gaze, tone of voice, etc.) to speculate on the potential problems that might be caused by language differences (Olaniran, 2001; St. Amant, 2002). Subsequently, people’s interactions have been coupled with different communication styles and ways of expressing distinctive cultural values: “The low-context communicator might be very comfortable being direct about feelings and opinions, whereas the high-context communicator might feel rather constrained by CMC [...] For example, a Korean colleague who teaches at an American university reported that she often feels constrained in e-mail conversations with her U.S. colleagues. Having a preference for high-context communication, she finds the direct, low-context style of her colleagues a bit off-putting (Martin & Nakayama 2010, 402).

2. Setting the scene

Communicators in high-context cultures expect their messages to be decoded not only from subtle signals (facial expressions, intonation, posture, environment, etc.), but also by relying on individuals’ cultural background. Establishing long-term interpersonal relationships and using background information are two key factors in interactions, as the listener is already “contexted”. In high-context cultures, participants often use subtle or implicit nuances that take on certain connotations over time. By sharing these experiences and perpetuating this form of communication, an audience is expected to think and act in the same way. Hence, similarity becomes an important characteristic since high-context cultures are generally defined by a mutual history, religion and ethnicity. As such, the meanings that they convey become clear for the members who are already familiar with the underlying message in someone’s writing or speech, for that matter. From this point of view, communicators from low-context cultures who tend to pay more attention to the words themselves and share less background information, often miss out on embedded implications and become outsiders.

In low-context cultures, communication cues are transmitted through clear-cut messages and participants are expected to explicitly state their point of view with a high degree of precision. A CMC environment might present challenges with regards to context communication preferences even if messages are exchanged between people who value the same form of communication. This kind of situations remind us that there is no strict categorisation into either high- or low- context cultures, since many cultures display a blend of traits that sometimes overlap, resulting in the impossibility to classify them as exclusively HCC or LCC. Gudykunst and Nishida reinforce this statement by asserting that “both low- and high-context communication are used in every culture, but (...) one tends to predominate.” (1986, 542). Unlike high-context cultures that focus on the group and the implicit message, low-context cultures are usually diverse and concerned with the individual. People are expected to overtly state their point of view so that communication is straightforward, leaving no room for misinterpretation. Furthermore, by adopting an action-oriented approach, participants aim to interact with each other and encourage a linear communication style to allow for as many people to understand it as possible.

At this point, definitions and delimitations concerning the concept of “communication style” should be provided in order to avoid confusion or inconsistencies along the way. According to Martin & Nakayama, communication style refers to “the metamessage that contextualizes how listeners are expected to receive and interpret verbal messages.” As far as the metamessage is concerned, this implies “the meaning of a message that tells others how they should respond to the content of our communication based on our relationship to them.” The scholars add that “A primary way in which cultural groups differ in communication style is in a preference for high- versus low-context communication” (2010, 228). Subsequently, the authors mention that there are “at least three distinct dimensions of communication style: high-/low-context, direct/indirect, and elaborated/understated.” (Martin & Nakayama 2018, 145).

Drawing on Hall’s framework, countries such as Japan, China, Korea, France, Greece, Spain, Brazil or Italy are situated at the high end of the cultural context spectrum: “In Japan, the over-all approach to life, institutions, government, and the law is one in which one has to know considerably more about what is going on at the covert level than in the West. It is very seldom in Japan that someone will correct you or explain things to you.” (Hall 1976, 112). The Arabs, Africans and South Americans also pertain to this category. Martin & Nakayama stress that “many cultural groups around the world value high-context communication. They encourage children and adolescents to pay close attention to contextual cues (body language, environmental cues), and not simply the words spoken in a conversation.” (2010, 228).

Conversely, at the low end of the continuum, communicators from North America, Germany or Switzerland depend less on the context of a situation to convey a certain message: “[...] in low-context communication, the majority of meaning and information is in the verbal code. This style of communication, which emphasizes

explicit verbal messages, is highly valued in many settings in the United States. Interpersonal communication textbooks often stress that we should not rely on nonverbal, contextual information. It is better, they say, to be explicit and to the point, and not to leave things ambiguous” (Martin & Nakayama 2010, 228). Scandinavians and other northern Europeans are also more logical and analytical each time they interact with others. Hence, the potential for misunderstandings to occur is greatly diminished: “How many times has the reader heard, <Answer the question, *Yes* or *No*.> Such statements reveal the U.S. courts as the epitome of low-context systems.” (Hall 1976, 107).

3. Research aims and methodology

Based on this framework of reference, our research is focused, first of all, on analysing the extent to which communicators rely on “context” to overtly state something in low-context cultures, or to covertly render a message in high-context cultures. Second of all, we aim at emphasizing that culture-specific ways of communication are typically reflected in the use of phrases that count as allusions (historical, literary, etc.) or opaque culture-specific items. Thus, by taking into consideration variations in communication style, we will mainly rely on one of the three distinct dimensions that we have already mentioned, namely high-/low-context. Our choice is guided by the fact that high- and low-context communication is closely related to the indirect/direct and, concurrently, to the elaborated/understated dimensions. On one hand, communicators from high-context cultures prefer to use an indirect and elaborate style, focusing on the underlying meaning and tone that needs to be deduced from the rich, expressive language. On the other hand, the low-context way of conveying a message is based on openness, using a direct style and rather simple assertions which are highly valued especially in business contexts.

Recognising a preference for high-context or low-context communication significantly helps us comprehend cultural discrepancies that extend beyond spoken words. That is, these styles of communication, coupled with strategies of explicitation and implicitation, should act as a constant reminder regarding the importance of flexibility and adaptability in communicating effectively across cultures. Out of the wide range of phrases and idiomatic expressions, we have selected some English ones that carry a significant cultural reference. By means of the comparative method, we aim to discover their French counterparts while examining if they differ considerably in terms of “contexting.” In order to highlight the importance of cultural dimension (high versus low) in our fully globalized times, their Romanian correspondent will also be taken into consideration.

4. Corpus design and use

The first expression that this paper focuses on is the idiom *To meet one's Waterloo*. Its equivalent in French is *À trompeur, trompeur et demi*, while Romanians use *Orice naș își are nașul* (*Și-a găsit nașul* is another popular version). In each case, the

meaning behind these phrases is to be defeated by someone who is too strong for you or by a problem that is too difficult for you. Or broadly speaking, you will find your match. The English version underscores the preference in low-context cultures to communicate explicitly so that people can derive meaning from the words themselves. The battle fought at Waterloo in 1815 resulted in the epic defeat of Napoleon's army by the Duke of Wellington. Since the decisive battle represents a momentous historical event, the full meaning of the idiom can be easily grasped and does not require an impressive amount of background knowledge on behalf of the participants.

Conversely, the French equivalent does not include a proper noun to denominate a geographical or any kind of entity. From this point of view, the tendency for low-context cultures to be concerned with the individual is confirmed, since proper nouns (like Waterloo) also express uniqueness. Unlike the English idiom, the French equivalent comprises an adjective to convey the deceiving nature of a person who might encounter an even more cunning one, as no trickster is unmatched. While the use of *trompeur* facilitates the process of communication and ensures that the negative connotation is conveyed, participants still have to resort to explanatory methods to grasp the full meaning of the idiom.

The Romanian correspondent demonstrates that communicators in high-context cultures pay attention to several factors besides the actual words. In this case, the importance of interpersonal relationships is confirmed by the use of the common noun *naş* that is semantically charged. In the Christian religion, a godfather is an adult who either acts as a moral figure in the development of another person's child or plays a symbolic role as spiritual advisor for a young married couple. *Orice naş îşi are naşul* highlights the godfather's role as a spiritual parent who watches over, perpetuating the long-lasting tradition that each couple is undoubtedly guided throughout their married life. The Romanian phrase becomes, thus, axiologically loaded with culture-specific elements and connotations that reflect the high level of contextualisation to convey the full meaning of the phrase. Both French and Romanian correspondents reiterate either the adjective *trompeur* or the noun *naş* to underscore their role as constituent elements.

The next English phrase that we have selected for analysis, alongside its French and Romanian equivalents, is *As old as Adam*. Again, the meaning of the English phrase can be easily conveyed, since participants who use it overtly state the ancient characteristics by associating them with the Bible and the first human being ever created by God. The use of a biblical character enhances the idea that something dates back to old times or a person is of a venerable age, establishing a straightforward type of communication that allows for as many people to understand it as possible. The adjective (*old*) becomes a noun (*temps*) in the French equivalent that also bears a historical allusion.

Unlike the English phrase, *Au temps où la reine Berthe filait* relies heavily on context and implicit meaning. Although the onomastic component is still noticeable, ancient times are evoked with reference to Queen Bertha – wife of Pépin the Short

and mother of Charlemagne, who died in 783. The Romanian phrase (*Pe vremea lui Pazvante Chioru*) closely follows the same pattern and even contains a direct correspondent (*temps->vremea*). Individuals' cultural background affects, once more, how well they are able to decipher the implied meaning since they should be familiar with the subtle reference to Pazvantoğlu – a soldier who rebelled against Ottoman rule and frequently attacked the Romanian land called Wallachia in the late 1700s and at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Pazvantoğlu is also spelt Pazvan Oglu and alludes to the Epic of Köroğlu – a prominent legend that archetypally portrays a hero who seeks to avenge a wrong in the oral traditions of the Turkish people. In Turkish, *Kör* is an adjective which signifies blind, hence its correspondent *chior* in the Romanian language.

Consequently, in order to grasp the meaning behind the French and Romanian phrases, communicators should, first of all, familiarise themselves with real historical characters. Only by gaining a full understanding of the national or local specificity of these phraseological units with onomastic components, could their cultural potential be rendered. Meanwhile, the use of a biblical name with universally known connotations does not involve getting acquainted with certain ages or periods of different people. Hence, the English phrase does not impose the disambiguation of the cultural element.

Nevertheless, if we take into consideration other idiomatic expressions which comprise biblical names and apply a cross-linguistic perspective, we can notice an absolute equivalence in terms of onomastic components. As such, the English idiom which refers to an act which seemingly appears to be harmless but expresses, in fact, false love or an act of betrayal is *Judas kiss*. The correspondents in French (*baiser de Judas*) and Romanian (*sărutul lui Iuda*) appear identical in terms of structure and semantics. Likewise, the English expression used to refer to a person who refuses to believe anything until he/she is shown proof is a *doubting Thomas*. In order to express the idea of skepticism, the French say *être comme Saint Thomas*, while Romanians use the equivalent *a fi Toma necredinciosul*. Another behavioral characteristic such as wisdom becomes explicit in the English idiom *wise as Solomon* – a direct reference to the biblical King which also allowed for the adjective *Solomonic* to designate a wise and reasonable way in making difficult decisions. The correspondents are *aussi sage comme Salomon* (a slight difference in terms of spelling, since the letter *o* is substituted with *a*) and *a avea mintea lui Solomon*.

If we tackle aspects such as the grammatical patterns of the three languages in focus and the method of literal translation, there are slight changes. Nevertheless, there are also some noun phrase idioms which involve no alterations and have total equivalents in English, French and Romanian (*the good Samaritan* – *le bon Samaritain* – *bunul samaritean*; *the sword of Damocles* – *l'épée de Damoclès* – *sabia lui Damocles*; *Achilles' heel* – *le talon d'Achille* – *călcâiul lui Ahile*). The literal translation is also applicable in a famous phrase that does not encompass biblical allusions, but contains a proper noun. *All roads lead to Rome* is an English idiom used to convey that different techniques or unusual methods of achieving something have

the same outcome in the end. Indisputably, the phrase draws its literal meaning from the days of the Roman Empire, back when an incredible network of roads was built up and radiated out from the magnificent capital city. There was nowhere in the world such an advanced system of roads, with all paths from every province essentially leading to the same destination: Rome. This intricate system was one of the main factors which helped the Roman Empire become the most powerful one in ancient times. The Romans understood that not only goods, but also military forces and, most importantly, knowledge could be transported effortlessly if all the roads were linked directly to the city. Thus, direct and easy access could be facilitated as long as all the provinces were subservient to the Empire through every road attached to them. In this case, Rome acts as an important cultural carrier, since communicators need to know the history behind this idiomatic expression to reach a full understanding of the context. As we can observe, the cross-linguistic equivalents in French and Romanian are similar in meaning and structure: *Tous les chemins mènent à Rome – Toate drumurile duc la Roma.*

Another well-known English phrase used to convey that a person has a lot physical strength is *as strong as an ox*. In this case, a mental image of the powerful animal is instantly triggered and there are no implicit nuances for communicators to uncover. Predictably, the cross-linguistic equivalent in French (*se porter comme le Pont-Neuf*) is highly contextualized, as the common noun *ox* is substituted with the name given to the oldest standing bridge across the Seine in Paris. As such, participants have to be familiar with this cultural connotation and understand the historical allusion. In this case, misunderstandings can easily occur between communicators who might rely on the literal translation of Pont-Neuf (New Bridge) and misinterpret the conveyed message, by referring to innovation instead of robustness. Unlike the English phrase, that relies on simile, (an expression that includes the words *like* or *as* to draw a comparison) and the French equivalent which bears the same pattern (contains *comme*), the idea is rendered in Romanian in an even higher contextualized manner. *A fi sănătos tun* comprises a common noun which is unusually placed after an adjective. The meaning of the message is, thus, covertly conveyed while communicators also need to intuitively draw a comparison between the adjective *sănătos* and the noun *tun* (since the phrase is devoid of an explicit element such as *ca*). Nevertheless, the use of the large, powerful gun counterbalances the somewhat opaque phrase structure and should suffice to convey the meaning of the English and French equivalents.

5. Conclusion

Cultural background plays a key role in people's ability to understand messages. Culture-specific ways of communication are also reflected in the use of English phrases and/or idiomatic expressions that rely on clear-cut, explicit code (with no risk of confusion) while their equivalents in French and Romanian frequently infer meaning and leave room for interpretation. The disambiguation of the cultural element is often necessary in these predominantly high-context cultures, while some

correspondents also raise an issue of inconsistency between different periods of time (*Adam* versus *Berthe* or *Pazvante Chioru*). Additionally, some noun phrase idioms in English bear identical equivalents in French and Romanian, while others have replaced the onomastic component or even eliminated it whatsoever.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, most phrases and idiomatic expressions, which comprise an international cultural component (such as a Biblical character) that is recognised worldwide, have a literal translation. The meaning, thus, is easily conveyed in the words themselves, instead of covertly expressed and assumed to be understood by the others. Partial equivalents are also rendered when universally known connotations are no longer perceptible and the cultural character of the onomastic components influences the word combinations and, ultimately, results in issues of translatability. In these situations, communicators who wish to understand the national or local specificity of the phrases and/or idiomatic expressions must rely on a broader context to grasp their origin and cultural connotations. In some cases, the level of decoding is directly proportional to the extreme sides (high and low) of the context continuum.

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